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# Dismantling Glass Ceilings: Ethical Challenges to Impasse in the Academy

Debora Y. Fonteneau

## Abstract

*This article uses numeric and qualitative data to interrogate the impact of affirmative action policies on shattering glass ceilings and resolving impasse in the academic lives of African Americans. This work takes its trajectory from previous research on glass ceilings (Marina and Fonteneau, 2012). Two brief case studies from both PWIs and HBCUs are mentioned to ponder complex attitudes toward race, gender and power. In extracting meaning from the policies, practices, and cases, it became clear that attitudes toward power and authority are influenced by context, but even more, by an individual's sense of right and wrong. This work is heavily vested in the African American woman's social and professional mobility, the very nature by which African Americans have gained presence in academic environments. This work suggests that affirmative action policies and institutional systems of redress have had little effect on resolving impasse and career gridlock.*

The concept of “glass ceilings” as a site where insurmountable professional limitations appear, and are confronted, but not overcome, is well documented in American popular culture and industrial society. Glass ceilings, as a place of “impasse” where spatial dimensions embedded in institutional infrastructures do not allow a positive turn, ascent, nor going forward, are multidimensional in expression. Historically, African American women have faced glass ceilings in terms of tenure, promotion, inclusion, as well as increasing rank, and status in post-tenure scenarios. When institutional structures combine with intersectional biases such as race, class, gender, and color, some African American women fail to gain professional and economic ascendancy. At other times, psychic pain, part of the fallout from having to confront and challenge glass ceilings, can have a paralyzing effect on careers. Finally, in the larger public view, African American women are impacted by ascendancy issues in regard to negative perceptions of their social and moral character. In the latter case, I advance a position that scholars have failed to make critical connections between socio-economic impasse and African American women's professional engagement with glass ceilings in the academy. Gridlock in the socio-economic space of African American women's lives is often mirrored in their professional and academic ambitions and *vice versa*. Neither higher education nor political discourse has freed African American women from effects of negative stereotyping, and professional stasis.

This article reveals that legal approaches have not closed socio-economic gaps for African American women or dismantled glass ceilings that bar her progression in the academy. I use an approach grounded in moral philosophy to expose the infrastructure of systems that keep African American women in the sub-strata while privileging those who burden her with stigma from the inimitable slave past. Moral philosophy takes into account errors of knowledge and moral failure—both of which refer to rational beings—as barriers to resolving deadlock. Institutions of higher education ought to strive to do

what they know is right in relationship to constituents; erase incorrect teachings (that lead to inappropriate behavior) in favor truth; abstain from putting allegiance to a group over doing what is morally correct. Following moral good rather than succumbing to moral failure is a transformative process, where change and transcendence are possible.

Most academicians are able to agree with the proposition that African American women's value has historical roots in utility, from that position flows interconnected systems of oppression that continuously follow her progression from slavery to freedom, from field to academy. It is harder to get people to behave in ways that demonstrate agreement with what they know is true, when it does not benefit their own agenda for gain. In spite of high achieving African American women, past and present, their elevation to "equal" has not come.

To begin, historical and contextual research defines and situates academic African American women as stakeholders whose numbers have increased in higher education. At the same time that numbers have increased, disparity exists in the rate of their development as African American women move from entering graduate school to promotion from assistant professor to full professor, and from there to administrative posts. With this in mind, it has been hard to qualify why with an escalation in numbers of admissions and doctoral graduates, the disparity gap between African American women and Whites does not close. In grounding the paper's subject of impasse and disparity, I turn to some relevant literature to document the failure of affirmative action to bridge gaps of absence and lack. Research and anecdotal information substantiate unmediated "Chilly Climate" issues as accompanying and compounding impasse. We begin with the role of affirmative action as a political document that has failed to equalize the position of African American women in the academy.

### **Affirmative Action, Policies, Practices, and the Compounding Impasse**

Even though United States (U.S.) Labor Department (2013) figures indicate that six million women workers in higher occupational classifications because of affirmative action policies, the majority of this number are not African Americans. In this case, several sources, including the U.S. Labor Department signify that the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action are white women (Conrad, 2008). Malveaux (2008) found African American women are more likely to be employed than African American men; African American women earn lower wages than African American men and white women..., with white women earning a median \$663 per week in 2007, compared to \$629 for African American men and \$566 for African American women. All three groups earn less than White men, whose 2007 weekly median earnings were \$850.00. Malveaux's data supports my thesis that there is a corresponding relationship between African American women's rank and status in the academy and their socio-economic status in the world at large. Malveaux maintains that while African American women represent two-thirds of all African American undergraduates, and the majority of graduate students, African American women are less likely than African American men to reach the pinnacle of their occupations.

Lederman (2012) reviewed statistics from the American Council of Higher Education Report and found that female chief executives rose to 26.4 percent from 23.0 percent in 2006; and from 19.3 per cent in 1998, and 9.5 per cent in 1986. Probing deeper

into these figures, Lederman discovered that these percentages also include community colleges where women hold a third of college presidencies, and women's colleges where female presidents are the norm. If historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other minority serving institutions are excluded, only nine (9) percent of college presidents are members of minority groups. As long as the numbers for African American executives in the academy remain about the same, indications for a harder path to the top are in store for African American women. Lederman and others have uncovered a growing trend in using outside search firms to bring in executives. This maneuver makes it harder to rise to the top from within. Given that both Stripling (2012) and Lederman find that the path to becoming a college President involves having served as Provost, or at least a term in an Academic Affairs office, the use of external search committees lessens the chance of African American women shattering the glass ceiling; rather, such gestures help to hold the ceiling in place.

There is not enough scholarship on tenure and promotion as well as quality of life issues for untenured African American women professors at HBCUs and PWIs, especially in comparison to their white counterparts, who seem to thrive at both. Difficult teaching loads seem to be more of a problem for women than non-historical minorities. Unfair work distribution at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and HBCUs are part of intercollegiate structural and systemic glass ceilings that can lead to a stalemate in progression for African American women. Until a body of personal narratives supported by internal institutional documents from African American women is gathered, we will not have a clear picture of educated professionals, their progression, rank, and status within the academy. Institutions need a year by year diary documenting administrative attention to leveling the playing field. The administrative diary should have a year by year accounting of distribution of equal opportunities; mentoring; research support; and the tenure candidate's formal response to the same. Only qualified personnel should decide teaching loads based on an accurate reading of transcripts. Furthermore, teaching loads should correspond directly to the tenure candidate's field(s) of expertise. Having unqualified persons read transcripts and capriciously assign classes to unqualified personnel, has had a domino effect in mis-educating students, and contributing to persistent errors in knowledge. Boards of Regents will say that problems associated with assigning classes are out of their purview. Therefore, women professionals need to band together and establish a hotline for reporting inequities. Institutions that do not follow strict, equitable policies in work load distribution and appropriate teaching assignments should face state and federal cuts to their budgets for administrative capriciousness. Glass ceilings could then be dismantled piece by piece.

### **The Failure of Affirmative Action to Remediate the Past in Academia and the Public Sector**

**Academia.** For some time, scholars have debated the merits of affirmative action in creating more diverse academic communities that foster the expansion of the field in terms of scholarly contributions and on how to promote specific intentional practices that work to ensure the professoriate more adequately reflects the population at large (Rodriguez 2007). Rodriguez maintains: "the particularities of race and ethnicity are nuanced by the complexities of accent; nationality; sexuality; age; teaching style; fashion

style; class; color; gender; degrees of femininity; and masculinity; names; size; and subjects we teach” (pg.160). As noted by Crenshaw (1989), affirmative action, in its directive to note either race, or gender as “single-axis” determinants of discrimination, to the exclusion of intersectionality, will not do. This major limitation of affirmative action policy seriously affects juridical justice for African American women. Crenshaw notes that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and their claims may be rejected and their experiences obscured because courts and institutional infrastructures, refuse to acknowledge that employment experiences of Black women can be distinct from that of white women. Crenshaw also notes that the interests of Black women may be harmed because Black women’s claims are viewed as so distinct from the claims of either white women or Black men, that claims of discrimination are denied. In “Exposing the Culture of Arrogance in The Academy” Thompson and Lonque (2005) affirm that glass ceiling issues still exist, and that the presence of Black faculty and other faculty of color is crucial to higher education. I add, that such a presence must be respected and valued rather than mocked and relegated to token status.

**Public Sector.** Rule (2008) believes that white women have been the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action. As such, some white women gained middle class and upper class status by virtue of higher education and their entire families benefit from their ascendancy. Goodwin (2012) suggested that the economic rise of the middle class and upper income families was largely due to affirmative action and access to education and jobs for white women more than anything else. Conversely, Black women have not been able to benefit their families to the same extent of white women. Salary differences between Black women in relationship to their white counterparts are another factor buttressing assertions that affirmative action has had unintended positive consequences for Whites and negative consequences for Blacks who have only gained an estimated 1.2% on white income. Marble (1995) in *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics* furthers this notion stating:

white women are overwhelmingly the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action.... White women have gained access to educational opportunities through the implementation and enforcement of such policies [as affirmative action]. But most of them clearly do not share the political perspectives of African Americans and Hispanics on this issue, nor do they perceive their own principal issues to be at risk if affirmative action programs were abandoned by the federal government or outlawed by the courts. (85)

Nathason and Young (2006) see affirmative action laws as approaching extremes in “conferring greater benefits upon white women than blacks of either sex” (87). These scholars agree that eradicating impasse in the economic gap between African Americans and Whites are unlikely and only small indications of progress through have been shown through affirmative action.

If I look at glass ceilings in terms of today’s unemployment, among the major worker groups, the unemployment rates for adult men (7.1 percent), adult women (6.3

percent), teenagers (22.7 percent), whites (6.4 percent), blacks (13.0 percent), and Hispanics (9.3 percent) showed little change in August 2013. The jobless rate for Asians was 5.1 percent (not seasonally adjusted), changed little from a year earlier. When I add to these figures an unemployment rate for African American youth that nearly doubles 22% of teenagers (Bureau of Labor Statistics: U.S. Department of Labor, 2013), I deduce that a higher number of African American college graduates have not significantly lessened the economic disparity gap for this group as a whole. I conclude, affirmative action has proven inadequate in brokering change in the attitudes and behaviors of those who are gatekeepers in regard to the ascent of African Americans in general and African American women in specific. Legislative measures such as the 1963 Equal Pay Act, 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1970's Title VIII, and Title IX of the Education Amendments, all address discrimination, but fail to close gaps of disparity in economics and quality of life—even for well-educated African Americans. Catherine Hill (2009) of the American Association of University women found a disparity in tenured professorships; she noted that more than twice as many men (64%) as women have tenure. Again, as we find that legislative policy fails to ameliorate gaps in status and rank as well as unemployment and wage disparity for African Americans, I am more firmly committed to seeing the issue of glass ceilings as a moral problem.

So far this paper has discussed the failure of affirmative action as a legal recourse for closing gaps of disparity among African American women in higher education. A failure to bridge economic lapses is also reflected in high unemployment rates for African Americans in general. Failures to bring about economic and social mobility of African Americans through affirmative action and institutional systems of redress for discrimination resonates in low numbers of tenured and full professors in the academy as well as a lack of high representation in professional positions in the public sector. It is fair to say that affirmative action has not been the single, determining factor in determining the success of African American women. As such, I aver, that it is necessary to study the course of human events within the context of individual and collective lives, before obfuscating the problem with limiting, ambiguous statements. Dixon (2013) agrees with my position that narrative methodology is critical in illuminating systemic oppressions. The way to confront the chilly climate is to address it through professional responses and women sharing their personal narratives of how they overcame the competition that can exist in academia. African American women need a central reporting agency for submitting documented institutional lapses.

If we combine what we have learned from institutional reporting, federal statistics, and the public sector on issues of equity and unemployment we can agree that there is a connection between what is happening to African American women in the academy and in their lack of elevation in the larger society. Educational researchers need documentation for African American women who don't learn about internal opportunities that count toward advancement, salary, and professional enhancement, until they encounter information through a negative experience. Being left out of discussions for advancement is a "chilly climate" issue. Dixon (2013) suggests that recent feminist research has contributed to current discussions of how the chilly climate most affects women. Institutions should move from a dependency on "affirmative action" to using "affirmative activism". I propose that affirmative activism also includes encouraging

women to follow up by using narrative methodology as a tool for exposing discrimination and bias against female faculty in academia.

### **Case Study and Narrative Methodology**

The case study approach is one way to use narrative methodology to document discrimination and the presence of Chilly Climate issues. Case studies allow researchers to interrogate and unfold complex issues, as they manifest in a single case. Thompson and Lonque (2005) reported that faculty who felt devalued by students and those who frequently felt devalued by a department chair or dean had a higher rate of dissatisfaction. Their research led me to select case studies that reflect the values of individual workers who arrive at impasse with the values of the University. Let us look at an actual case, composed of two incidents where an untenured African American female professor encountered physical aggression twice in the same department. The two incidents, treated as one case, are culled from a campus-wide Affirmative Action/Chilly Climate workshop initiated by the Affirmative Action officer at a major university.

#### **Case Study 1**

**Incident #1.** A White female graduate student was walking down a hallway at the same time as an African American female professor walking in the opposite direction. The white female and the African American assistant professor were not walking alongside each other. The African American woman was at the lower end of the hallway, walking to her left; the white woman was mid-way when each spotted the other. Without provocation, the White female shortened the distance, crossed the hallway, and, backed the African American assistant professor (walking in the opposite direction) to the wall, cursed and threatened her. The African American woman edged away, up the hall; the white female walked away. The African American assistant professor had no warning that the white woman was angry and ready to attack her. The assistant professor reported the unprovoked attack to the chairperson.

**Incident #2.** A white male undergraduate, unprovoked, stood in the doorway of an African American Assistant Professor's office. The student worker taunted the Assistant Professor, waving the professor's mail in front of her, threatening not to ever let her have it. The white male used profanity and refused to leave the office doorway, when asked to do so. The University did not have a policy of work-study students delivering faculty mail.

These incidents, concerning the same African American female professor occurred at the same large university. Neither of the students involved received a reprimand. The department chair decided that the white female graduate student was "feeling the economic times" and "her own poverty"... "her feelings got out of hand." The assistant professor was told that the white male student was "just a kid"...leave it alone". Here I pause to interject a few questions that could be used for discussion purposes: 1) Were these students and the chairperson reminding the assistant professor that she had reached an impasse? 2) Were these students and the chairperson reminding the assistant professor that hat confronting their behavior was a glass ceiling issue? 3)

Did either student behave improperly because of a perceived reversal of class and status that challenged traditional notions of race?

## **.Case Study 2**

The following is an attempt to bring some balance to this discussion of impasse, glass ceilings, and the interrogation of policy by including a case study of African American faculty on an African American campus. Broadening the field of discussion to a distinctive set of values in a particular location, and restricting the group to African Americans in higher education, provides another angle for looking at the strength and weakness of affirmative action policy. There are African American institutions that are not well funded; have low enrollment and a high number of remedial students in the first two years of undergraduate school. There often is a high attrition rate, a low graduation rate, and students typically take longer to complete a course of study.

Typically, at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), the faculty, staff, students, and administrators share in a history that for centuries has valorized education as the chief means of escape from the unrelenting stigmas attached to African Americans with a slave past. Shared histories and a common slate of ancestral memory flowing from one generation to another has not been enough to galvanize a social bond between African American men and women who stand under the same historical umbrella. Even though the steady rain of discomfort hitting the umbrella is mostly the same for all who seek protection underneath it. Other histories of betrayal, distrust, and partiality make it hard to recover togetherness and mutual support that surely existed at some time, for some people. The following case study extends past history and sheds light on present impasse.

Professors in the case noted that it is unethical to give a student with a 40% average a C, or passing grade. Furthermore, the professors found that academic freedom has a glass ceiling when faculty performance clashes with institutional goals. The President believed that creating passing grades for students would save the institution from losing funds and correct a high attrition rate among first year and second year students. In short, the professors thought that the university policy was unethical and constituted negative benevolence. One professor bemoaned that...The policy would undermine the academic integrity of his/her classes and his/her professional standards as an instructor.

The professors are clearly at an institutional impasse, however, there was a female dean, who was also at an impasse. This dean may have already reached the pinnacle of her profession; as such, she was at an impasse serving a function. She was required to carry out the President's orders to ask for the professors' resignations, and if necessary, terminate them, or be terminated. These professors did not find remediation through institutional channels. The lawsuits in this case that involved African Americans at an HBCU did not invoke race or gender as a reason for litigation. All persons and entities involved were African American. Race and gender were implicit in this text, but not in the language used to mediate a moral failure. The complexity of cases like this one in relationship to affirmative action policies reveals limitations of the law and vulnerabilities for African Americans. Current criteria for legal redress make it difficult for African Americans to file certain kinds of discrimination petitions against other



African Americans. Some might even venture that African American universities in their “apartness” are close to existing outside of the laws that protect against discrimination and harassment.

In analyzing each incident, each story, each case, I return to Dixon’s (2013) characterizations of a “chilly climate”. I find the following key issues as major contributors to impasse and the glass ceiling in the academy: 1) Isolation – limiting their [women’s] opinions and feedback in departmental meetings; 2) Bullying – creating environments that limit one’s potential contributions to the department through mocking, discouraging, or insulting their work; 3) Separatism – not involving peer responses and reactions to important institutional goals; 4) Unavailability – not being available to address an individual’s specific needs and experiences; and 5) Minimizing – using language such as ‘It’s all in your head’ or ‘You’re internalizing the situation’ when serious issues arise in the classroom or department. There are other serious contributions to chilly environment, not listed here. Any systematic behavior that diminishes the professional relationship between academic peers has serious implications. This brief exposition suggests that other methodologies and analytical practices bear weight and hold transformative value for shattering glass ceilings and moving beyond impasse.

### Concluding Thoughts

At this juncture, I would like to nuance earlier indications that affirmative action *nearly* failed those it was designed to help. Instead, I want to posit that the *language of* affirmative action policy had unintentional consequences for Blacks and Whites. The language of affirmative action policy allowed Whites considerable opportunities to prosper, and reinforce the solidarity of their family structures while ensuring further privileges in higher education and in business sectors. In comparison to whites’ rise in prosperity under affirmative action policy, Blacks made few gains. Since part of the failure of affirmative action policy resides in outcomes that do not address the complexity Black women’s issues, it becomes necessary for Black women to sprinkle the pages of academia with their histories—triumphs, failures, jubilees, coalitions, mentorships, acceptances, and rejections. Affirmative action policy that does not properly address the margins, signals that it was not written from the margins, nor in the language of marginalized people.

Stories of moral dilemmas, spiritual crises, and psychic pain are part of the cases presented in this paper. Any lessons gleaned from this article or other personal narratives of African American women and men educators are important to the collective memory and cultural history of a people. African Americans need a repository of stories that help to make sense out of present moral dilemmas, institutional crises, and legal conundrums in the and twenty-first century. Agreeing with Dixon (2013) I surmise that a chilly climate of isolation and oppression is no longer administered solely by men, but also is fueled by women in higher academic positions who can exacerbate the problem. This isolation and oppression is no longer administered solely by whites, but it is also fueled by African Americans in higher education. For the collective memory of humankind we must write and disseminate the sages’ wisdom through a language gleaned from a cultural history of struggle, engagement, and triumph.

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